

Cay Rademacher

**Mörderischer Mistral. Ein Provence-Krimi mit Capitane Roger Blanc
(Murderous Mistral. A Provence detective story with Capitain Roger
Blanc)**

A Novel, 271 pp.

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An old house in Provence

Roger Blanc kicked a stone, upsetting a black scorpion in the process. The creature was as long as his thumb and raised its venomous stinger threateningly into the air. A second later it had disappeared into the bushes. Welcome home, Blanc thought.

He was a Capitaine in a specialist unit of the Gendarmerie in Paris, a man in his early forties with pale blue eyes, in a black T-shirt, jeans and worn trainers. An expert who had solved so many cases that it was spooky even to his colleagues. He lived in an apartment above the rooftops of the sixteenth arrondissement. Was married to a wonderful woman. This at least had been the case up until 11.30 a.m. last Friday. Now it was 9 a.m. on Monday and his career was in tatters, photographs of his apartment were being put up in an estate agent's window this very minute, and his wife had moved in with her lover. He had had better starts to the week.

The sun shone down mercilessly upon a ruin of brownish-yellow stone more than 800 kilometres south of Paris. The town of Sainte-Francoise-la-Vallée was so small that his Nokia sat nav had needed almost a whole minute to calculate the route from the capital. Sainte-Francoise-la-Vallée lay deep in the south, almost bordering on the Étang de Berre. Didn't they have some oil refineries and ports somewhere down there? In any case, Marseille was not far, and that meant drugs and corruption and the contempt of the Paris headquarters.

Blanc had inherited the run-down house in the Midi from his uncle ten years ago. Until today, he had only been here once; he must have been around four or five years old. Only a few images stuck in his head, a narrow room, wooden shutters, closed against the summer heat. Sunbeams coming through the wooden slats like a fan of yellow light creeping across the floor tiles. A sharp taste had remained more memorable. His uncle smilingly giving him a glass of Rosé. He had gulped it down, greedy with thirst, and had noticed the acidity of the alcohol too late.

After that Blanc had never again visited his uncle. Years later, he had paid the inheritance tax without further ado because it had been too cumbersome to bother

with the sale of a house that didn't mean anything to him. Besides, he had too much to do. He always had too much to do. But that would probably change now too. The property was much smaller than he had thought. And much more dilapidated.

It was an 18th-century oil mill in the Touloubre valley. A two-storey building leaning against a towering twenty-metre rock face like a tired wanderer. Walls of roughly carved stone, as thick as those of a castle. Ochre red roof tiles, shifted out of place, some broken. Climbing vines grew exuberantly over the walls, the wrought iron window grills and the front door. Its wood had once been blue, but the paint had cracked and weathered to a pale grey. The shutters hung down from rusty hinges like ragged sails.

Bottle-green water from the stream that flowed around the property welled over the moss-covered stones; dragonflies flitted through the light reflexes like tiny helicopters. Thistles and thorny shrubs whose name Blanc did not know blossomed in front of the property. In the far corner, an ancient oleander grew right up to the edge of the roof, a stunning perfumed cloud of green leaves and blood red blossoms. It was already so hot that the cicadas were chirping in the trees. Blanc pulled out a wrought-iron key, as heavy as a hammer, a piece that any local history museum would have presented in a display case. He used his Opinel knife to cut back the vine tendrils growing around the lock and put the key into the opening. He needed a few minutes and all his strength until he managed to defeat the rusty mechanism. At least no one had broken in, he thought, took one more tangy breath and forced himself into the dim interior.

The coolness of old buildings. The smell of dust, a fragrance like old paper and sand. No one had ever cleared the house. Blanc stepped into a time machine: a kitchen with work surfaces in yellow marble, an ancient ceramic sink, the faucet of dulled brass. Around a large wooden dining table, once painted white, now weathered, stood five chairs of different shape and size. Blanc entered a living room with a low table from the sixties, a sofa, upon which lay the mummified body of a bat, and a fireplace of soot-covered stones. In the bedroom he came across a mahogany wardrobe, Empire, a piece that would cost a fortune in Paris. Next to this, an iron bed without a mattress. (Blanc remembered that his uncle had died in here). In the bathroom an enormous bathtub, which stood on cast iron feet in the form of fierce looking lions, covered in dirt, with three open wine bottles in it whose content had long evaporated.

Blanc abstained from going up the stone staircase to the first floor. He went back into the hallway, where a grey telephone with dial sat on a small sideboard. He picked up the receiver. Dead. What had he been hoping for? He opened the fuse box next to it, paused briefly, then switched on the mains. He expected to hear the bang of the antique fuse going, to see sparks, to breathe in the fumes of burnt cables. Instead, an old living room lamp flickered and glowed yellowish under the layer of dust that had gathered on the bulb. So at least there was electricity. He suddenly remembered that there had been a bill from the EDF every September, which he had never understood, but always paid. Now he knew what it was for. Blanc pulled out his Nokia. No signal. That must be the rock that supported the rear wall of the house. Has its advantages, he thought.

Blanc stepped back outside, exhausted from the last argument with Geneviève, from the long night drive from Paris, from the heat, from the work that lay ahead in order to make a liveable house out of this ruin. All his worldly possessions were in his old green Renault Espace. He and Geneviève had bought the car when the children were small: spacious, but unfortunately as eager to go on strike as a CGT trade union official. His wife – his ex-wife – had left him the car the day before yesterday. He wondered what sort of car her new guy drove? Don't kid yourself, Blanc reproached himself.

"Hey!" an aggressive voice across the Touloubre. "This *cabane* is not for sale. It belongs to some idiot from Paris!"

"I am the idiot from Paris!" Blanc shouted back. On the other side of the riverbank he recognised a white-haired, not particularly old man, who was sitting on a battered green tractor, eyeing him suspiciously. Behind him a whitewashed, dirty house of indefinite shape, encased in rusty scaffolding without wooden planks. The bleating of goats sounded from somewhere. Must be a farm, Blanc thought. "I am the new occupant", he added amicably. The last thing he needed now was a neighbourhood dispute.

The man on the tractor was small and wiry like a bantamweight. "You're not allowed to increase the size of the house during the renovations", he yelled. "The municipality won't allow it." His voice was tanned by Gitanes. He didn't remove the yellow cigarette from his mouth while he talked.

"I'm not building a hotel here", Blanc assured him. "*Connard*," he added in a whisper, "Idiot".

The neighbour called out something unintelligible towards his house, where evidently someone was hiding. Then he accelerated and roared off with his tractor.

Blanc folded his almost two metre long body together, dove into the Espace and rummaged around in the chaos on the passenger seat. A sports bag fell into the footwell, scattering notebooks and CDs. He was not particularly dexterous, his arms and legs were too long and always in the way somehow. At last he found a faded blue baseball cap with the imprint *Nova Scotia*. He was born in the north – there where people, without being prompted, said sorry to strangers when it did not rain for two days in a row. He did not fancy meeting his new colleagues with a peeling nose.

New colleagues ... it was the 1st July and every decent Frenchman was already lazing about in the endless summer holidays. But he had to report in with a new office. "*Merde*," Blanc swore and slammed the steering wheel, "*merde, merde, merde!*"

At 11.20 a.m. on Friday he had been summoned to the headquarters of the Gendarmerie, a cold new functional building in the Rue Claude Bernard in Issy-Les-Moulineaux on the other side of the Périphérique. Monsieur Jean-Charles Vialaron-Allègre had ordered him to come in, Enarch, member of parliament, Secretary of State in the Ministry of the Interior and one of those men in the ruling party whose immense ambition would only be satisfied by moving into the Élysée. His office was

furnished in the same exchangeable luxury as the Air France first class lounge in Roissy. The Secretary of State was about fifty years old, thin, the sparse hair stuck to his high skull with hair grease, his tailor-made suit was of the particularly expensive and unobtrusive sort. He had a de Gaulle nose and as his head constantly twitched back and forth on his scrawny neck when he walked, he reminded Blanc of a solemn heron.

Blanc had stood in Vialaron-Allègre's office, swaying with tiredness. He had not had a single day off in the last two months. Often enough he had spent his few hours of sleep in the Gendarmerie station, with the rubber desk mat in front of the monitors as his pillow. This was the price he had to pay (the only one, he had thought at the time) in order to apprehend a former trade minister before he could make all the incriminatory documents disappear. An old story, but not yet time-barred: in the nineties, France had delivered power turbines to the Ivory Coast. The African government had paid millions of francs for them – and a few of these millions had not turned up in the national treasury nor with the power station constructor, but rather in bank accounts in Liechtenstein. This nice sum had then funded the election campaign of precisely this minister when he attempted to become mayor of Bordeaux, wangling himself a well-paid retirement pad in the process.

No politician likes a flic who exposes corruption, as with each scandal he has the feeling that the hits are getting closer. On the other hand, the minister was a heavyweight within the Secretary of State's opposing party and there were elections looming on the horizon. It was therefore doubly advisable to appear incorruptible. Blanc therefore hoped that he would be promoted: Commandant de Gendarmerie. Not bad for someone his age.

"Congratulations. You are being transferred." Vialaron-Allègre's voice sounded like chalk on a blackboard.

Blanc, full of expectation and exhausted, needed a couple of seconds for the meaning of these words to explode in his brain.

"Where to?" He realised that he was gasping as if someone had punched him in the gut. Paris was the centre of the world for a Gendarme if he wanted to pursue a career. And for a Frenchman from the north, who never, never ever wanted to be reminded of his stuffy-damp background. Who just wanted to get away from the dilapidated terraced houses and disused steel works. Away from places where the only people who still had work were the officials in the unemployment office. Away from a world in which beer and cigarettes had become the sole purpose in life.

"Down south."

Blanc's thoughts danced. Midi. Mafia. Provinces. Back of beyond. The rubbish dump of every career. "You're freezing me out?"

The Secretary of State raised his hands. "Freezing you out? In the hottest region in France? I ask you!"

What have you got to hide? Blanc thought. Was Vialaron-Allègre involved in the official corruption surrounding the turbines? What post had he held back then? Had he already been a minister? In which commission? Too late: The south of France was the dream of millions of Frenchmen. Every voter, provided that he was

interested in such a detail in the first place, would see the relocation of the corruption investigator Roger Blanc as a reward for services rendered – and not as a punishment. Very subtle. “When?” he asked and tried to keep his facial expression under control.

“Immediately. You start on Monday morning. In the Gendarmerie of a place called Gadet. Something different to Paris, right, *mon Capitaine*? You have a little place nearby, don’t you?”

Blanc needed endless moments to figure out what the Secretary of State was talking about. How did this crook know about this? He hadn’t thought of the ruin he had inherited for years and had never told a colleague about it. “Then I’ll start packing the files in my office”, he finally mumbled. It was meant to be a threat, a last defiant gesture, a signal: I have already collected evidence against you, just you wait.

But if the Secretary of State was worried, he didn’t show it. His mouth formed a smile, while his narrow, grey eyes inspected him carefully.

“We will surely bump into each other on numerous occasions,” he said and shook his hand formally. It sounded like a declaration of war. When Blanc was already at the door, he called after him: “Your wife will probably also be happy to hear of your relocation to Provence.” It sounded like an insult, but Blanc needed more than an hour until he understood the meaning of this sentence.

Blanc typed the address of the Gendarmerie in Gadet into his mobile phone. The App showed him a country road, a couple of bends, a roundabout, barely more than two and half kilometres. He turned the key and the Espace started at the third attempt, contrary to expectations. He slipped the CD of Fredericks Goldman Jones, which Geneviève had given him after their first week together, into the system and rolled towards the large, half dilapidated gate that defined the access to his property. At least he wouldn’t get stuck in a traffic jam every morning like in Paris, he thought – and hit the breaks after twenty metres, because he could not continue on the narrow country lane. Before him stood three pale grey horses, staring through his car disinterestedly.

Blanc sounded his horn. A horse neighed. He sounded his horn again. The horses turned their backsides towards him. Blanc considered whether he should simply run the beasts over. But his Renault was so rickety that he would probably get the short end of the stick. He fumbled the Nokia from its holder on the dashboard and zoomed in on the map. There was no other way to Gadet than this route départementale. He wound down the window and called: “I’ll turn you all into sausage meat!”

“You use donkey meat for sausages, not Camargue horses.”

Blanc turned in his seat. On the passenger side stood a horse, which seemed to him to be at least half a metre taller than the other three. A rider sat casually atop; she must have come across a field. He thought her to be around forty; her thick black hair was tied back in a tight plait, her skin was so deeply bronzed by endless hours in the sun that she would never again lose this complexion. She wore moccasins, jeans and an old white T-shirt with a red heart and the words *Don du Sang*.

"Pardon. Sometimes my daughters forget to close the gate properly." She indicated a field beyond the road that lay half hidden behind a row of high cypresses. Next to it was a house of red stone with yellow Oleander blossoming in front. Bougainvillea tumbled in red cascades over a wrought iron balcony on the first floor.

"Then we are neighbours." Blanc gave his name and peeled himself out of the car, but left the motor running, out of fear that the Espace would not restart on the country road.

She jumped down from the horse with the springy lightness of a gymnast. "Paulette Aybalen."

He shook her hand and indicated in the direction of the ruin. "I will be seeing to this heap of stones."

"Finally someone living there again. Your holiday home?"

She had seen the '75', thought Blanc, the Parisian number plate, the idiots' badge. She will think the worst. Better to tell her the truth straightaway. "I have been transferred here," he explained. "Gendarmerie."

She hesitated for a millisecond, a blink of suspicion that he had seen in almost everyone when they first learnt of his profession. "You will definitely not get bored here!" she finally replied.

"I will divide my energy between work and the renovations. I have already just received a few bits of advice on the development."

Paulette's smile disappeared. "Serge," she said and nodded. "Serge Douchy."

"Someone who's used to speak his mind."

"Serge shouts around the place like a drunken *clochard*, his sheepdogs bark half the night, his herd of goats stinks to high heavens, his mouldy house was build without planning permission, he drains water illegally from the Touloubre with an asthmatic diesel pump and shoots his gun at everything that has fur or feathers. But otherwise he's okay."

"That's roughly how I rated him too."

"You are the professional after all." Paulette smiled again. "I will herd the horses back into the field before they end up at the butchers."

Blanc looked at her and took a deep breath. It smelt tangy. "What's this smell?" he asked.

"There for the first time I saw dark green bushels that appeared out of the Baouko grass like miniature olives," she answered. "A quote," she added, when she saw his puzzled expression. "Marcel Pagnol. He experienced the same thing when he walked in the countryside in Provence for the first time. The smell overwhelmed him. That's wild thyme. It grows everywhere beneath the trees here. Very healthy. Very tasty."

Blanc, who had lived mainly off croissants and stodgy baguette for the last year, knew neither how thyme tasted nor what it looked like. He nodded vaguely, so as not to appear like a complete fool.

"I will drop by and bring your wife a few recipes," Paulette said, who had guessed his ignorance.

"You will have to email them to her. My wife is in Paris."

Paulette Aybalen swung herself back on the horse and said nothing. The other three animals had trotted back to the field of their own accord. Blanc had no idea which heavenly sign from their mistress they were following. "Then I shall bring you the recipes. We will run into each other a lot."

"I will never mention horse sausage again." Blanc got behind the wheel and gently accelerated so as not to frighten the animals. In his rear view mirror he saw the rider's gaze following him.

The air shimmered over the narrow strip of tarmac road. The voice of a radio announcer came through the radio, warning of the danger of forest fires in Midi and reminded his listeners of the ban of throwing cigarette butts or glass into the countryside. It sounded like a curse. The soil on both sides was brown and crusty like dried bread. He passed a wall of stacked boulders behind which he could recognise the green grey leaves of young olive trees and the ruins of a building that perhaps had once been a stable or a tiny farm. Pines and oaks on a hillside. A hollow with rows of grapevines.

A dented white lorry came towards Blanc, much too fast. The road was so narrow that he had to steer his Renault onto the sandy hard shoulder in order not to avoid a collision. He swore, the Espace shuddered, stones crunched under the right front wheel. The glove compartment flew open and an old model car fell out, a green Opel Rekord. Blanc had never been able to throw away the Majorette- and Matchbox cars of his childhood. He did not display them in showcases, like nostalgic collectors do; they just lay around everywhere and resurfaced in the most surprising places before they once again disappeared for a long time. Like this old Opel.

A gift from his father. He had been a Flic too and was long dead: a nightly patrol, an oil spill in a bend, and the old blue R4 used by the Gendarmerie back then had smashed into a tree like a tin can. His mother had always smoked a lot, and a week after her fortieth birthday a doctor had found shadows on her lung on the X-ray and given her the diagnosis with cold regret. Two ridiculous deaths within a year had left the teenage Blanc an orphan.

Later Blanc had studied law in Paris, as he wanted to apply to the Flics, *École des Officiers de la Gendarmerie Nationale* in Melun after the *maîtrise*. He had met Geneviève, first term history of arts, in his second week at university. She was delicate and black-haired, he tall and blond, she came from the Languedoc, he from the North, she talked all the time, he liked to stay silent, she considered Eric Rohmer's films the best in the world, to him they were like Valium, she smoked Marlboro, he hated cigarettes, she liked to copy paintings late at night, he liked to swot paragraphs early in the morning. They were compatible in nothing. They were the perfect couple.

The children arrived almost immediately, long before the wedding, which they arranged much later and more as a formality. And suddenly Eric was twenty-one and studying biochemistry in Montreal, because the job perspectives in France were so appalling. And Astrid was twenty, working in Paris as an event manager and Blanc had no idea what you actually did in a job like that. It couldn't be much

because his daughter's bank account was a black hole. He had taken his life with Geneviève for granted, just like breathing, so that he of all people, the bloodhound with the finest nose on the job, had had absolutely no idea that for years there had been someone else.

Secretary of State Vialaron-Allègre must have known that when he transferred him to the back of beyond on Friday morning. Had he perhaps even foreseen how Geneviève would react? Gendarmes were soldiers to whom the age-old military rule applied: an order is an order! Even if it turned out to be the order to disappear from Paris within a couple of days. When Blanc had returned home from Issy, a defeated man, his wife had listened to him and afterwards calmly announced that she would stay in the capital. That she had long wanted to talk to him properly and that now was the right time. And then she had packed her suitcases. Since then Blanc had slept four hours a night at most and felt like a boxer who'd gone twelve rounds.

It was gleaming red and orange in the forest to his left: several heavy-duty fire engines were parked in the shade of the pine trees. Firemen in full gear, who had only removed their helmets. Many of them sat at a wooden picnic table and were eating breakfast, other were dozing on the car roofs. Blanc remembered the forest fire warning from the radio.

In the Midi the *pompiers* did not position themselves in their stations but right in the middle of the threatened forest. Clever. He would be happy to pay a few euros for the chance to sleep in the pine shade now too.

He parked the Espace a little further on between two pines, leaving the motor running, and got changed. He carelessly threw T-Shirt, jeans and shoes onto the back seat and then forced himself into the unaccustomed uniform and put on his holster. Usually gendarmes can choose whether they want to report for duty in civilian clothes or in uniform. In the last few years he had almost always worn black gear, so that his civilian clothes had become something of a uniform too. However, for his first day in the new office it would be better to dress up in his uniform – you displayed the authority of the state in uniform and made yourself a little more invulnerable. Finally he put on the narrow, blue cap, worn by gendarmes. Many colleagues had protested when the *kepi* had been abolished in 2011, yet Blanc had always felt like an extra in a Louis de Funès film in the old headgear. He accelerated.

He turned off at the next crossroads, saw a high, yellow wall to the right, and behind that, tombs and a chapel. The street led into Gadet, light-coloured houses on both sides, a modest church in the centre, sycamore trees. Cool air. Four bars, tables on the sidewalk, the smell of coffee and croissants. The early patrons – farmers, old men in camouflage suits, young guys who parked their motorcycles between the tables – stared at his car. Two boulangeries, a butcher, a tiny Casino-market, a bar-tabac. He wouldn't go hungry here. He wondered which newspapers they sold here? A modern sports field by a stream – the Touloubre, as Blanc read on a sign. The post office on the left, opposite the Mairie, a small castle with the aura of summer abandonment. He would have to wait until 15th August to register his place of residence in the major's office and to change his number plate.

Finally, the Gendarmerie. A low-rise building, two storeys high, orange-yellow plastered concrete, dark windows with bars in front, a steel door. A UFO from the seventies that did not age with grace like the traditional buildings but simply looked run down. Dog piss at the corners. Movement behind the window next to the entrance. Blanc parked his Espace alongside several patrol cars and took a deep breath.

In the guardroom, a young, overweight gendarme, his light blue uniform shirt darkened by patches of sweat, gave him a scrutinising look. Blanc introduced himself and showed his ID.

“Ah,” the gendarme merely grunted and did not consider it worth his while to give his name. *Brigadier Barressi* it said on his uniform badge. “The boss is upstairs.” With his fleshy hand he indicated a staircase in front of the rear wall of the room. “He has been warned, as he already heard about your transfer here,” Barressi added, when Blanc had already placed his foot on the first step.

“When did he hear about it?”

“Thursday evening.”

Then they had known about it before I did, Blanc thought angrily. The stairwell smelled of a harsh cleaning liquid that gave him a headache. At the top he entered a corridor with orange metal office doors on both sides, some open, some closed. Torn-up duty rosters on a notice board, yellowing wanted posters, circulars from the ministry, a few mug shots and badges. A coffee vending machine, evidently defunct since long ago, covered in dust.

Cigarette smoke from an open window. Heat. At the end of the corridor a big door, closed. A brass nameplate: *Commandant Nicolas Nkoulou*. “*Merde alors,*” he whispered and knocked.

He stepped into the tidiest office he had ever seen. The light writing desk with leather desk pad and black computer screen looked like something from a home furnishings catalogue. The shelf with meticulously labelled files on one wall, the window opposite the door with a yellow-and-white blind in accurate folds. A gold-framed certificate. No private photos, no souvenirs, no knickknacks, not even a coffee cup.

The youngest Commandant Blanc had ever met sat enthroned on a leather office chair. Nicolas Nkoulou was thirty at most, and his wrinkle-free face made him appear even younger. His skin was ebony black; his frizzy hair was cut so short that it clung to his skull like a thin helmet. Elegant, gold-framed spectacles. A blue uniform shirt that radiated so brightly that it pained his eyes. Dark blue summer trousers with immaculate sharp-edged pleats. Highly polished leather shoes.

“So Paris sent you”, Nkoulou greeted him and rose from his chair so heavily it seemed as if he was in pain.

Blanc looked at his superior and the office and knew it couldn't have come any worse. Brilliant. Ambitious. He wants to go to Issy, he thought, right up to the top. He fears that I will stick to his impeccable reputation like pigeon shit. “*Mon Commandant, reporting for duty,*” he said and did not know whether to greet in a

military fashion with hand to forehead or per handshake or not at all. He chose to leave his arms hanging down.

“So you specialise in corruption.”

Blanc nodded.

“Here in Provence everyone is corrupt.”

Blanc nodded.

“However, they don’t allow themselves to be caught.”

Blanc no longer nodded.

Nkoulou cleared his throat. “I will introduce you to your colleagues,” he said without enthusiasm.

Blanc followed the Commandant from room to room to encounter a string of faces and names: a small chap with a battered nose and enormous shoulders; a giant of a man with metal spectacles like the ones that had been fashionable back in his school days; an overweight brunette with a Gauloise between her overly red lips. She pushed the blue, squashed packet across the desk towards him. Blanc, who did not smoke because the cancer had eaten away at his mother, declined. She pulled a face and you didn’t have to be an experienced psychologist to guess what she was thinking. Two dark haired men who seemed like brothers and threw each other sneering looks when he entered. A young female officer with long brown hair, who barely looked up from her iPad when he was shown in. Finally the last room in the corridor, the furthest away from Nkoulou’s office: two oak imitation desks in front of a streaky window. On them two computers – the oldest models that Blanc had seen in this Gendarme station, grey boxes, the only ones featuring glowing, bulky monitors, rather than flat screens.

“Your new home,” the Commandant said in a tired voice. “And your partner: Lieutenant Marius Tonon.” He looked disapprovingly at the desk, which was covered in Croissant crumbs. “No idea where the fellow is.”

“Did he not have a partner until now?”

Nkoulou shrugged his shoulders. “Don’t let yourself be influenced by the colleagues’ gossip.”

“I haven’t heard any yet.”

“You will, believe you me. ‘Tonon brings bad luck.’ Superstitious rubbish, provincial claptrap. I have been heading this station for a year now and nothing has ever occurred. But I cannot find anyone prepared to go out on patrol with Tonon. An officer from Paris is just what I need now. An unbiased mind.”

Blanc was not sure where the Commandant was praising or mocking him. “We will manage,” he replied.

At this moment a man in his mid-fifties entered the room who could only have achieved the minimal height requirement of 1.79 metres for entry into the Gendarmerie with the help of insoles. Strong hands covered by a black tufty hair like animal paws, a body bloated within the crumpled uniform, a purple bulbous nose, thinning dark hair all tangled. An odour welled into the room with him that Blanc initially thought to be cheap aftershave lotion, until he suddenly recalled a memory from his childhood: Rosé wine. You achieved the rank of Lieutenant in your mid twenties. If thirty years later you still hadn’t been promoted then something was not

right. Blanc was pretty sure that there must be some substance to the gossip about his new partner. He shook the hairy paw and introduced himself.

“A colleague from the North will be good for us,” Tonon replied. His voice was pleasantly low. A man who could calm a hysterical witness with one sentence and elicit a statement from a suspect, Blanc thought with surprise.

He smiled. “As a Parisian you are rarely called a Northerner.”

“Everything north of Lyon is Scandinavia to us lot.”

He pointed to the empty desk. “In the afternoons the sun shines so strongly through the window that you can’t recognise anything on the screen. It’s better to go to the café and ponder there.” He laughed.

Nkoulou smiled sourly. “You will have to postpone the visit to the café, *mon Lieutenant*. I am assigning you and Blanc a routine case so that you get to know each other, as it were. It’s in the ZGN.”

“ZGN?”

“*Zone de responsabilité propre de la gendarmerie nationale*. The 95 per cent of the French territory that is monitored by us and not by the *Police Nationale*. You really have been in the capital for too long, *mon Capitaine*.” The time-honoured, nonsensical division between Gendarmerie and *Police Nationale* had indeed become meaningless for the task forces in Paris: here the Gendarmes for the country regions, there the police for the big cities. Blanc would have to get used to working in the middle of nowhere again.

“What is this routine case?” he asked.

“A body. On a rubbish dump.”

“You call that routine?”

“You are a provincial gendarme now. According to the initial report we have received, I assume we just need to secure the crime scene.

There is some evidence indicating that the colleagues from Marseille will take over. ZPN. *Zone de responsabilité propre de la gendarmerie nationale*.” Once again his lips formed a cheerless smile. “But see for yourself. Brigadier Barressi has put all the necessary details together. You can’t go wrong.”

Blanc nodded. “A friend of abbreviations”, he whispered, when his superior had left the room.

“He can abbreviate his subordinates to such an extent - like nothing you have ever seen,” warned Tonon.

Downstairs Barressi handed them a note. “A body on the rubbish dump near Coudoux,” he mumbled, “right on the A7. A rubbish man found him and dialled 17. He was still smouldering.” The brigadier gave a cough.

“The rubbish man?” Tonon asked.

“The dead man. Burnt. But he probably didn’t die from it. The colleagues from traffic patrol were the first on the scene; they were on the motorway when the call came in. They say there are cartridges lying around everywhere. Kalashnikov.”

“Bon,” Tonon replied soberly and reached out for the report.

Blanc stared at him. “Good? What is good about it?”

“We will be back here for lunch. The small restaurant in Gedet is not bad.”

“Someone has been executed with an automatic rifle. We will be on the rubbish dump for hours.”

The lieutenant raised his hands. “A Kalashnikov is as common place in Marseille as an Opinel. You can buy one for 1,000 euros, duff ones for half of that. The dealers shoot one another into happy hunting grounds. No reason to be concerned. The rubbish dump is on the A7, which leads directly to Marseille. Commandant Nkoulou is right. We will secure the location where the body was found and wait until the colleagues from the city arrive. That’s one of their customers, *mon capitaine*. They will take over the case. Then we can go and have lunch.”

Barressi threw Blanc the car keys. “I always wanted to see a Provencal rubbish dump,” he mumbled and pushed open the steel door.

Tonon indicated towards a patrol car. “That is our Mégane,” the lieutenant said and squeezed himself into the passenger seat of the blue estate car. Blanc did not like the large lettered marking of *Gendarmerie* on the side door, nor the white stripes, the red-white reflectors on the bonnet, the flashing lights. He had always travelled in unobtrusive civilian cars in Paris. Awkwardly, he adjusted the seat and rear view mirror to his height and then started the car. “Do you know the way?” he asked.

“I may only be a lieutenant, but I am the older one. Therefore I suggest that we drop the formalities. I am Marius. We are going to be seeing each other more often than our wives anyhow.”

“That’s for sure,” Blanc grumbled.

“Drive to the roundabout and then we follow the signs to Lançon. I will guide you from there. We will be there in fifteen minutes.”

Blanc liked to carry out his investigations alone. Flics did build a team for each new case; sometimes three or four officers would work on one case, sometimes hundreds. He knew and accepted that.

However, he liked to select the jobs where he had to fend for himself: he would tail a suspect for hours or days if necessary. He would bury himself in old files and confiscated papers. He would crouch behind his desk, scribbling in his notebook and thinking. Now he felt hampered by this meaty colleague smelling of Rosé, on the way to a burnt body.

“The commandant is very young,” he said vaguely to avoid a lasting silence between them. He drove carefully, but in contrast to Paris, here he was not hooted at nor cut off, as everyone recognised the police car.

“Nkoulou is there when I arrive in the mornings. And he is still sitting in his tidy office when I leave in the evening. He loves rules, diligence and punctuality. He would drive even a German mad. A few colleagues and I have a bet going. If you want you can get in on it. Whoever finds out first whether Nkoulou has a girlfriend wins the pot.”

“A man without a private life. Does he ever go out during his time at work or does he lock himself in his room all day?”

“He goes to the shooting range. They say he was the best shooter of his year.”

Blanc felt the metal of the Sig Sauer SP 2022, whose holster he had fastened at the back of his belt, contrary to all regulations on how to carry a service pistol. As a young flic he had shot at a fleeing offender in panic during a robbery that had gone wrong. The guy had hovered between life and death for a week. In the end he had pulled through, and Blanc had received his first commendation because he had put a long-sought criminal out of action. But he never wanted to experience a week like that again. Since then he had never again had to draw his gun during an operation. And he only went to the shooting range when the obligatory yearly training was scheduled.

Tonon guided him through an industrial estate on the outskirts of Gadet, past a swimming pool dealership which had put up an enormous glimmering blue ready-made pool in a vertical position, an image like a surreal dream. Then fields again. A potter's straw-covered shack, offering colourfully varnished vases, tureens and ceramic cicadas at a roundabout. A village. Blanc turned onto the route départementale 19. A graveyard with an ancient, crooked chapel. And suddenly, hundreds of metres below the country road, a grey band that Blanc initially thought to be a wide river: the motorway. The A7 milled its way through grey, rocky hills; the route départementale ran parallel to the wide tarmac strip for almost a kilometre. Cars and lorries and camper vans roared to their left, black diesel fumes drifted through the air. Blanc closed the window. Nevertheless he still not only smelled exhaust fumes, but suddenly something else too: decay. Ripped plastic bags fluttered in the branches of the pine trees that provided shade to the right hand side of the road. Seagulls circled above them.

"The rubbish dump," said Tonon. With his right hand he briefly touched a gold medallion around his neck. When he saw Blanc's surprised face, he explained: "Sainte Geneviève. Our patron saint."

"Our?"

"The patron saint of the gendarmes. You're not Catholic, right?"

"I managed to be in church in time for our children's communion," Blanc replied. Geneviève, the saint of the flics. His wife would laugh about that one. His ex-wife. "Are you scared?" he asked his colleague.

"Scared of vomiting. I have never seen a burnt guy. Maybe he will look like mutton at *méchoui*. Could put me off my food."

"You are always thinking about food."

"You have to get your priorities right."

Blanc turned through a gate in a three-metre high wire fence onto an unkempt access road. He swore quietly when a green rubbish truck coming towards him forced him to the side and enveloped him in a cloud of diesel, dirt and dust. At one time there had probably been an additional valley in between two craggy cliffs. But now the hollow was almost completely filled with rubbish. Diggers pushed heaps of garbage together, surrounded by angry seagulls; thick, black plastic bulges bent upwards around the edges of the hollow – the edges of enormous plastic sheets that lined the hollow and were meant to protect the groundwater from dirt soaking in. It stank of rotten vegetables and decayed meat.

“It’s always worst in summer,” Tonon apologised. “They offload half of Provence’s rubbish here.” He pointed towards a patrol car and a highway police motorbike that had parked next to two unobtrusive white delivery vans whose windscreens displayed plastic badges with the words *Techniciens d’investigation criminelle*.

“The forensics team is from Marseille?”

“Non. The next unit is stationed in Salon. Good people. They take their time. They have a lot less to do than the colleagues from Marseille.”

Blanc got out and shook a brigadier’s hand, then that of a young prosecutor with a sunburnt face. They had no choice but to wait in the stench and heat and watch the forensic specialists do their job. White body overalls marked *NTECH* on the back, overshoes, gloves, masks – he asked himself how they coped with the heat. The location of the body was at the edge of the parking area, behind a large open container for offloading scrap metal. He recognised the rusty skeleton of a bed frame and a bicycle frame that poked over the edge. The forensic team didn’t take the most direct route to the body, but approached in a half circular indirect route from the back. Someone took photographs. Two white coats knelt next to something, which from afar looked like a charred tree stump. A new smell wafted into Blanc’s nose: burnt flesh, evaporated fat.

“Who found him?” he asked the brigadier.

The flic indicated towards a man in a green overall who sat in the shade of a crippled pine tree and was just receiving a bottle of water from a very young female officer. “A rubbish truck driver. He is still gasping for breath.” He laughed derisively.

Blanc said nothing and went to the witness. Tonon followed him. They both knelt down in front of the man and Blanc pulled out a notebook and a chewed pencil. “Can I ask you a few questions? Or shall we wait a little longer?” the capitaine wanted to know.

The rubbish truck driver, a young Arab, shook his head. “Let’s get it over with,” he said and attempted a smile.

“Your name?”

“Mourad Ghoul.”

“When and where did you find the body?”

“I drive that lorry over there.” He pointed towards a black lorry with a crane and an empty load space. “Once a week I load up the containers with scrap metal and drive them to the metal trader. I was just about to attach the chains of the crane to the container, when I...” he struggled to find the right words, “saw the ... body. Or: I smelled it first. He was still smoking.”

“Completely burnt?”

“I didn’t take a closer look. I ran away to the driver’s cab, grabbed my mobile and called the flics. Then I puked.”

“You were alone?”

“My colleagues have been driving their rubbish trucks in and out since the morning, but they take the ramp further down. Private people can offload their rubbish here. But there is no one here this early in the morning.”

“Have a rest.” Blanc stood up. He felt dizzy. The heat, the stench, the tiredness.

“Occasionally some idiots meet up at the rubbish dump at the weekends,” said Tonon, who straightened his body with surprising ease. “They arrange to hold illegal paint ball duels.”

“Paintball on a rubbish dump?”

“Some guys get a kick out of this. Sometimes we arrest one of them. Trespassing.”

“Must have been a pretty hot paintball.”

“Maybe there were witnesses?”

“*Bien*. Go round all those who you have previously arrested for such games. If we’re lucky, then maybe someone was there.”

A marked white Jeep Cherokee stopped next to them whose exhaust pipe must have a gaping hole. When the asthmatic motor was turned off, the vehicle shuddered. A woman jumped out, mid-thirties, long brown hair; face half hidden beneath outsized sunglasses from the seventies.

Tonon gave her a nod and introduced her. “Doctor Fontaine Thezan. *Médecin légiste* in the hospital in Salon.”

Blanc shook her hand. Her T-shirt and hair exuded a faint smell of marihuana. He threw his colleague a quick glance, but he didn’t seem to notice anything. “We have to be patient,” he explained.

“Looks like I arrived at the precisely the right moment,” the doctor responded airily and pointed towards a technician who had pushed the mask off his sweaty face and was coming towards her.

“The body is yours, Madame,” he panted. He barely glanced at Blanc.

“Fencer position,” Doctor Thezan mumbled. “Bending of the arms caused by heat-related contraction of the muscles. Charred skin, cracks in the face due to the extreme heat.” Blanc who had spent the last few years mainly working his way through bank statements, files and letters, tried to keep his breathing flat. The stench of burnt flesh, mixed with the odours emanating from the rubbish dump. This bloody heat.

In front of him lay a body, the skin like charcoal, the arms bent parallel, the legs parallel, the destroyed face a grimace – the body had little of a corpse, more something of a shop window dummy after an arson attack. No hair, no ears, no clothing except a belt buckle that lay on the torso. Unrecognisable features. No blood.

“You don’t have to look over my shoulder,” mumbled Doctor Thezan, who had noticed him swaying.

“It’s just the heat,” the capitaine replied.

“You are not from around here.”

Blanc decided not to take the bait. “Was the victim burned alive?”

The coroner shook her head and pointed to indentations in the charred torso. “Probably bullet holes,” she stated. “The body is male. I will examine his lungs in the

institute. What is left of it. But it would surprise me if I were to find soot in his bronchials. He was no longer breathing when he burned.”

Tonon indicated towards the dusty surface all around, which the specialists had marked with small numbered signs. “Cartridge cases. Kalashnikov. At least ten. And we’re not allowed to go to the shooting range because we have to save money.” He shook his head. “Farid Berrhama was a thug and dealer from Salon who wanted to become one of the greats in the underworld of Marseille. They called him ‘Le Barbecue,’ because he always set fire to the guys he bumped off in order to cover up his tracks. And we never caught him. But a Corsican clan nabbed him in a brasserie, eight killers at once, twelve bullets in the body. Looks like someone wants to be Berrhama’s successor.”

“Drug dealers settling accounts?” Blanc wanted to know.

The lieutenant pointed his finger towards the charred body. “The guy has pilfered coke or heroin. Or he didn’t pay his debts. Or he snitched on someone. Or someone wanted to take over his territory. On average, someone is killed with a Kalashnikov once every two weeks in Marseille.”

Blanc recalled the scandal a while back when a mayoress from the city of Marseille requested the military be deployed to pacify the banlieus. Outrage everywhere. Mockery from Paris. Troops to Marseille! Sarkozy had made budget cuts just beforehand; 350 police jobs in Marseille alone. Nobody was outraged about that.

“There is enough there to get his DNA,” Doctor Thezan assured him. “And his teeth are all there. I will estimate his size and age from his bones. And I might even get the colour of his eyes and his hair. And what the last thing was he ate. We will identify him.”

“And then the boys from Marseille will take over the case. I will report to head office.” Tonon was just turning towards the Renault but then when he paused. The coroner had gently touched the corpse with her gloved hands. Carefully she turned the victim over. Something shone under the place where his neck had lain on the ground. Gold. The remains of a necklace. A medallion. Blanc and the lieutenant bent over it without touching anything. A cobra raised in a threatening manner was engraved upon the piece of jewellery. Two tiny rubies were bedded in the gold as red eyes.

“*Putain!*” Tonon swore. “I know that cobra. We can forget about the report to Marseille. This is someone from here.”

Charges against a dead man

Blanc waved the forensics team closer and pointed towards the piece of jewellery. Then he withdrew and let the experts do their job. “Seems to be a pretty rare piece if you can identify the body from it,” he whispered to Tonon.

His colleague nodded distractedly and looked around the car park. “If he is who I am thinking of then there is a motorbike here somewhere. He always travelled on his Enduro.” Tonon called a couple of brigadiers together. It took less than a minute before one of the uniformed men raised his arm and called them over. At the

edge of one of the containers stood an old Yamaha, half hidden, which Blanc had taken to be scrap: torn-off rear light, bump in the tank, bent handlebars, shattered front light, the left mirror was missing, only the rod was sticking out uselessly from the handlebars.

The lieutenant indicated the half bent up number plate with the “13”: “His banger. I know the number off by heart.” He gave a sign to the forensics man who sighed, pulled his mask up in front of his face, and began to examine the motorbike for fingerprints.

“Who is it?” asked Blanc.

“Charles Moréas. Provence is a better place without him.”

“One of your customers?”

“I wish.” Tonon sighed. “I spent years trying to catch the guy. Once we had something to use against him; he was caught speeding on his Yamaha. But he didn’t even pay this fine. No idea what became of it. The proceedings are probably still rotting away on a shelf in a court.”

“But you didn’t want to catch him because he was speeding on a country road?”

“No.” The lieutenant closed his eyes. “For murder. Or at least manslaughter.” He remained silent for a long while. “Moréas was a loner. And everyone who knew him wished they didn’t. He lived in a run-down house on land that belongs to the municipality of Caillouteaux.”

“Ours?”

“ZGN. Moréas is 38 years old if I remember rightly. He was. Nobody knew what he did for a living.”

“Did he have a wife? Children? Relatives?”

Tonon just laughed. “He had a few pieces of land. Here and there in the region, fields, forest, a hunting *cabane*. His parents were farmers, but they are long dead.”

“I heard land was vey expensive around here. Maybe he sold it and lived off the money?”

“Moréas? Never. He sometimes drove to his properties on his Yamaha and spent the night outdoors. And he scared off ramblers who got lost there in a way that ensured they never again took these paths.”

“With weapons?”

“Hunting rifles.”

“It’s enough to summon him.”

“I did. That was all we could do.” With a gesture of contempt Tonon pointed to the body, which was just being loaded onto a stretcher by two pallbearers who had arrived with their grey estate car. “Twenty years ago, when I was still a good flic, Moréas belonged to a clique who were specialised in highway robbery: two doctored motors, night time, a little-used route départementale. The bastards waited for cars with foreign plates. When they found tourists, the first car overtook their vehicle, brutally forced them to a stop. There was often a lot of damage to the cars. The tourists were outraged, confused, terrified. But before they could react properly, a second car approached, this time from behind. The bastards came from both sides,

dragged their victims out of the car, took everything – and off they went. We never caught them. Then one time something went wrong: during the getaway they hit a female tourist who had run onto the road in panic. They dragged her along for several metres. She was dead immediately. The guys got a shock and drove the car into a pine tree a few bends later. Some got away in the second car, a few had to be left behind. We got them immediately. And this time we had the number plate of the wrecked car. That is how we caught most of the others. All but one.”

“Charles Moréas?”

“One of his side kicks testified that Moréas had been involved. Apparently he was the gang leader. And he was driving the car involved in the accident. Several colleagues turned up at his *cabane* a few hours later and arrested him. Moréas denied everything. And the other guys we arrested testified to the fact that they had never seen Moréas before.”

“Sounds like a prearranged plan.”

“Well, yes. The guy who testified against Moréas died shortly afterwards in custody. Yard exercise, knife between his ribs, chaos, never caught the offender. He had nothing we could use against Moréas. No fingerprints in either car. And it was in the time before DNA traces. We had to let him go. I have tried to nab him ever since. I cannot get the image of that tourist’s blood trail on the tarmac out of my mind.”

“Someone got there before you.”

“A guy like Moréas will have a lot of enemies. It’s a pity we have to catch his murderer.”

